

Major James S. Rayburn, USMC

Direct Support during Operation DEWEY CANYON (U)

~~(C)~~ Twelve years ago, on 22 January 1969, Marines of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment (2/9) opened a fire support base (FSB) in a rugged section of Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam. The opening of this FSB—named FSB RAZOR—signaled the beginning of an operation which resulted in the preemption of the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive in the I Corps Tactical Zone. The 9th Marine Regiment and attached units were awarded an Army Presidential Unit Citation for their magnificent achievements during this operation. Launched under the code name DEWEY CANYON, the operation was to hit the enemy in his supply basket and destroy his logistical support capabilities. This mission was more than accomplished. The Presidential Unit Citation states in part, "This magnificent feat of arms, achieved against severe odds and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, was made possible by the extraordinary courage, skill, cohesion, and fighting spirit of the 9th Marine Regiment, 3d Marine Division and its attached units." One of the attached units was a small Comint direct-support team from the First Radio Battalion. This is the story of that team's contributions to the tactical commander during Operation DEWEY CANYON.

(U) The operation lasted from 22 January to 18 March 1969. The operating area was generally mountainous with dense jungle cover. It was a threatening, forbidding section of the world, yet it had a chilling, serene beauty marked by the Annamite mountain range, Da Krong River, and A Shau Valley. Amid this serenity enemy forces moved freely, as no major

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Free World force had penetrated this region. However, it was known that this section of real estate served as a major enemy base area for the stockpiling of weapons and other supplies. The area was also a primary route for enemy forces infiltrating into the coastal areas of I Corps. These enemy troops launched offensive operations against populated areas as far south as Da Nang. In early January, prior to the start of the operation, the North Vietnamese reopened Route 922 into the A Shau Valley after a long period of disuse. With the reopening of this route, vehicle traffic picked up considerably. It was obvious that the enemy was building up his supplies and forces in the area. Beyond this general information, reliable intelligence on enemy strengths, dispositions, and activities were sorely lacking. As events would prove, enemy forces concentrated in the area were sizable, consisting of major elements of two infantry regiments, an artillery regiment with one antiaircraft artillery battalion, and one regiment of rear services and transportation forces.

~~(C-CCO)~~ On 22 January, 2/9 encountered scattered small-arms fire when they were heli-lifted into their initial objective area. This enemy action did not prevent the accomplishment of their mission—the establishment of FSB RAZOR in the northern sector of the area of operations (AO). The following day, the Regimental Command Post and F Battery, 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines (2/12) moved into RAZOR. The First Radio Battalion Direct-Support Team arrived at FSB RAZOR on 25 January and commenced search and intercept operations at 1700 hours that afternoon.

~~(C-CCO)~~ The direct-support team consisted, initially, of four enlisted men. There was one Marine Gunnery Sergeant who served as the team chief, one Marine (b) (3)-P.L. 86-36 one Marine voice search and radio operator, and one Vietnamese soldier

provided under the Dancer Program. This Vietnamese soldier came from a pool of native linguists at First Radio Battalion Headquarters in Da Nang, and his services were nothing short of superb. The Marine ^{(b) (3)-P.L. 86-36}re provided by the 4th Platoon, First Radio Battalion at Vandergrift Combat Base. This base, located approximately 80 kilometers north of the area of operations, served as the principal support facility for DEWEY CANYON operations. With the exception of the addition of one officer and temporary augmentation provided to attempt innovations (e.g., manual Morse collection), these four men made up the team throughout the operation.

~~(C-CCC)~~ Equipment was light and battery-operated. The AN/PRR-15 radio was used for voice collection and proved a reliable piece of equipment for this type of direct-support operation. While various types of field antennas were used, the basic long wire strung between trees was the most effective. Efforts were made to establish SI secure voice communications with the 4th Platoon at Vandergrift. This attempt was unsuccessful due to the distance involved and intervening terrain features. Consequently, the team was basically isolated and relied on helicopter courier service for the exchange of technical cryptologic information and the delivery of certain creature comforts to team members, compliments of the 4th Platoon.

~~(C-CCC)~~ The modus operandi established by the team chief was simple but sound and was followed throughout the operation. Initially, all four members of the team shared in search operations in the VHF spectrum. Two enemy nets (one associated with the transportation group and the other an artillery net) were identified early on and placed on cast-iron coverage. The Dancer was relieved of watch-standing duties, and the remaining three Marines set up a schedule providing 24-hour monitoring. The Dancer was then notified whenever either of the nets became active. He intercepted the traffic and passed it to the ^{(b) (3)-P.L. 86-36}who performed decryption and trans-~~lation~~ routines. The finished product was handed to the team chief for review and evaluation and, subsequently, to the regimental intelligence officer for any action deemed necessary in support of the operation. A simple procedure which, by today's standards, may appear almost crude. Yet, despite its lack of sophistication in either technique or equipment, the system worked extremely well. Minor variations, which will be addressed later, were occasionally employed: some were highly successful, others abysmal failures.

~~(SC)~~ On 11 February the regimental command post, 2/12 command post, and the direct-support team relocated to FSB CUNNINGHAM, which had

been established earlier by the 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines (3/9). By this time, the Comint team was exploiting the enemy transportation group net and the artillery net, which consisted of 122mm gun batteries and their forward observers scattered throughout the area of operations.

~~(C)~~ The tactical situation changed considerably between the team's arrival at FSB RAZOR on 25 January and their redeployment to FSB CUNNINGHAM. Companies of 2/9 and 3/9 had begun an advance to the south towards the Da Krong River. Both battalions encountered small groups of enemy forces which were apparently screening the main enemy area to the south along Route 922. Company M, 3/9, came across a four-strand telephone line running from Laos into the Base Area 101 south of Quang Tri. Due to the dense jungle cover, this line had been invisible from the air. No wiretap attempt was made on this line which, if sampled, might have provided lucrative intelligence. The line was destroyed.

(U) By late January, the regimental commander had maneuvered his forces into position for the thrust across the Da Krong. Company G, 2/9, which was on the extreme western point of the offensive force alignment, was tasked with taking the Co Ka Leuye ridgeline, which provided excellent observation into the area of operation. Meanwhile, Company K, 3/9, had secured terrain in the extreme northeastern sector of the area of operation, which was designated as FSB LIGHTNING, and later occupied by two battalions of the 2d ARVN Regiment.

~~(SC)~~ During all this activity, enemy voice communications significantly increased. The tenor of these communications was that the enemy was shoring up his defensive positions and planned to conduct a stubborn defense should the Marines cross the Ka Krong and penetrate this area. There was no question of Marine forces crossing the Da Krong. The regimental commander had designated the Da Krong as "Phase Line Red." His force maneuvering actions had been for the sole purpose of disposing his units along the Da Krong for a concerted push south. To support this push, Company F, 2/9 had established FSB ERSKINE, to provide supporting artillery fire as ground troops moved across the Phase Line. From intercepts the regimental commander knew he was going to face a determined enemy.

(U) Everything was set for the coordinated advance to be executed on or about 31 January. Then another enemy made its sudden and fierce appearance: bad weather hit. Visibility and ceiling were reduced to zero. Weather conditions delayed the advance south. Resupply of positioned forces became impossible as

extremely thick and low cloud cover and heavy ground fog made resupply by air an impossible task. The regimental commander was faced with a most difficult decision: should he keep his forces in position and hope for a break in the weather, or should he pull his forces in closer to logistical support areas at FSBs? He decided on the latter after several days of continued bad weather; this decision proved correct, as the second enemy made its presence known for two weeks. Company G, 2/9, was pulled back off Co Ka Leuye, and other rifle companies were redeployed around FSBs CUNNINGHAM and ERSKINE.

(U) Company G's pullback off the slopes of Co Ka Leuye between 5 and 9 February is a heroic story. A large enemy force was encountered, and during the fighting five Marines were killed and another 17 wounded. The company was out of rations, and low on water and ammunition. Now it had dead and wounded to move. After four days of operating under the most strenuous conditions, a brief break in the weather permitted resupply and MEDEVAC of casualties. Marine air flew in, and amid fire from high ground on both sides of the Da Krong Valley, managed to get the killed and wounded Marines out.

(U) The most serious consequence resulting from the weather-caused delay was the time afforded the enemy to further strengthen and prepare his defenses to meet the expected assault.

(U) As the weather finally improved, on 11 February 1969, the 3rd Battalion started south across Phase Line Red. The following day, companies of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines (1/9) and 2/9 crossed the Phase Line. All advancing elements encountered strong enemy resistance.

~~(SC)~~ As the regiment attacked south, enemy transmissions filled the air. On the evening of 16 February, intercepted enemy traffic revealed that an advancing Marine company was engaging an enemy force which was serving as a screen for an enemy company-sized position approximately 200 meters to the rear of the screening force. By comparing this intercept with the known tactical situation, the regimental commander was able to determine which of his elements was being referenced in the intercept. With the knowledge that an enemy company was located behind the screening force, the regimental commander informed the appropriate battalion commander to halt the advance of his company, call in massive supporting arms artillery fire, and direct an assault on the position during the early morning hours on 17 February. This engagement resulted in 43 enemy dead with no losses to the attacking Marine force.

(U) On 17 February, a Marine officer arrived on FSB CUNNINGHAM from the First Radio Battalion Headquarters to assume duties as the team commander.

~~(SC)~~ As advancing forces continued their drive south, enemy communications made frequent reference to the movement of his artillery and associated problems, including a lack of vehicles and transportation problems caused by Marine artillery fire impacting along Route 922. Knowing that artillery fire was achieving success in disrupting the enemy's lines of communication, artillery units directed even greater emphasis on road interdiction.

~~(SC)~~ This increased pressure caused greater problems for the enemy. He made reference to impaired security of one of his critical supply areas in the vicinity of A Bum. The enemy was unable to get reinforcements into this area. This disclosure led to the supported commander's decision to direct forces against A Bum. As units of 1/9 advanced towards A Bum, enemy communications revealed the location of unidentified artillery pieces in relation to the advancing Marines. The regimental commander informed the commander of 1/9 of the approximate location of these artillery pieces. Battalion units swept the area and captured two Soviet-made 122mm field guns and four 85mm field guns. Prior to this event, Company C, 1/9 captured two 122mm guns.

~~(SC)~~ As the pressure on the enemy increased, he again made reference to one of his critical base areas. Tam Boi was facing grave danger and, if discovered and taken, its loss would be a tremendous setback. Intercepts indicated that heavy defenses were set up at Tam Boi and that it served as the location of at least one radio relay station. With his attention drawn towards Tam Boi, the regimental commander requested a B-52 strike (ARCLIGHT) on the area. The request was granted, and the ARCLIGHT hit Tam Boi on 20 February. Following the ARCLIGHT raid, Marine units assaulted Tam Boi and found extensive tunnel and cave complexes, two more 122mm field guns, large stores of ammunition, troop billeting spaces, an extensive communications facility, and other evidence which pointed to Tam Boi as having served as a major headquarters facility.

~~(SC)~~ The period 13-25 February represented the team's peak intercept period, with an average of 27 significant message intercepts a day. Near the end of this period, intercepted traffic began to reveal that enemy troop morale was deteriorating and that the enemy was in a general state of confusion. As a result of this stepped-up intercept tempo, the team was increased by six Marines. A manual Morse

intercept position was activated on 23 February and remained operational until 6 March. This collection effort was useless to the supported tactical commander,

[REDACTED]
A record special intelligence communications center was also established on approximately 24 February. This center, linked to the 4th Platoon at Vandergrift Combat Base, was somewhat successful although it did have its problems.

(U) The KW-7 was not compatible with the harsh operating environment existing at FSB CUNNINGHAM. If it wasn't dusty and humid, it was muddy and humid. However, the greatest problem was that this communications terminal required generator power. The tactical situation was not in consonance with the generator noise. Enemy sapper attacks against FSB CUNNINGHAM were a reality. Generator noise hampered the ability of friendly security forces on the FSB to hear enemy movements, and the noise served as a homing beacon for sapper units during the hours of darkness.

~~(C-CCC)~~ Communications center operations were rapidly limited to daylight hours only, and then for only short periods of time. The communications gear was eventually removed on 6 March, along with the manual Morse intercept position. Additional augmentation in the form of one Marine [REDACTED] (b) (3)-P.L. 86-36

[REDACTED] (b) (3)-P.L. 86-36 was provided from First Radio Battalion Headquarters. These men served with the team for approximately eight days during the last part of February and the first week in March. However, by 7 March the direct-support team was reduced to one officer and the four enlisted men who made up the original team.

(U) The operation was also entering its final phase on 7 March. Plans had been made for the extraction of all units in early March. Combat units again met their secondary nemesis, weather. Rain, heavy clouds, and fog prevented the lift-out of any units. Forward deployed companies were facing extreme difficulties. Marines in these companies carried a normal load of five days' food and four canteens of water. They had sufficient ammunition, provided there were no major engagements with the enemy. The distance between their positions and the various FSBs made it impossible to regroup around these resupply points as before.

~~(SC)~~ At this stage, Comint provided some extremely useful information. The enemy revealed that he planned to lay on extensive anti-aircraft, mortar, and small arms fire to prevent final removal of Marine forces in the Tam Boi area. This warning led the regimental commander to order continuous

tactical air operations and aerial observation in the area, and the preparation of detailed defensive fire plans.

(U) Just before dawn on the morning of 18 March, an enemy company supported by mortars attacked 1/9. The assault was repelled, and by noon the ground fog had cleared enough to begin removal operations. The total battalion was lifted out without any loss of life or helicopters.

~~(SC)~~ Intercepts during the final phase also revealed that an enemy 75mm recoilless rifle was positioned on one side of FSB TURNAGE, which had been established on 25 February as the site of Battery E, 2/12. In addition to the recoilless rifle, the enemy had also employed mortars targeted against the FSB. The enemy intent, as learned through Comint, was to try blocking the landing zone on the FSB by downing a helicopter. This warning was received several days in advance of the planned removal. At the moment the operation commenced, maximum supporting arms were employed to suppress the enemy gun and mortar positions, and the removal was successfully executed.

~~(SC)~~ The most significant Comint contribution during this final phase affected the lift-out of the regimental CP and other units on FSB CUNNINGHAM. This FSB had been under daily fire from enemy 122mm guns located high up on the ridges of Co Ka Leuye. Enemy artillery shooters had the primary landing zone bracketed. The decision was made to clear a new landing zone in the jungles approximately 300 meters outside the northern perimeter. This new landing zone would be used for the lift-out. An intercept on 16 March disclosed that enemy artillery fire was going to be readjusted to this northern landing zone. Several rounds were fired for adjustment, and it was evident that the enemy was, in fact, shifting his fire to the new landing zone. The enemy continued his fire until he had the new landing zone zeroed in. Activities on the FSB continued to give the appearance that this landing zone was going to be used for the removal. At the last moment, the regimental commander directed that the helicopters land at the primary landing zone, to execute the flyaway of Marines off the FSB. While enemy mortar and other ground fire in the area was rapidly shifted back to the primary landing zone, the 122mm guns were unable to reorient their fire in time, and no casualties were suffered from 122mm artillery fire during the operation.

~~(SC)~~ In the view of the regimental commander, the most valuable support Comint provided to the individual Marine on both FSBs CUNNINGHAM and ERSKINE was the early warning of incoming 122mm artillery fire. This warning was

(b) (1)
(b) (3) -50 USC 403
(b) (3) -18 USC 798
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invaluable and undoubtedly saved lives. The early warning of incoming fire provided by the team gave the individual Marine necessary time to seek protection. The 122s claimed no lives on FSB CUNNINGHAM. When the enemy transmitted his preparatory firing order to his forward observer located somewhere in the vicinity of the FSB, the incoming alert was sounded.

~~(S)~~ Also, during the periods of good weather, an aerial observer was requested. In some cases, the observer would arrive on station before the enemy commenced firing. Previous intercepts, coupled with actual experience, revealed that the enemy would not fire when an observer was in the general vicinity of the artillery position. A system was developed within the regimental headquarters to attempt to locate and neutralize the enemy guns. This system involved close coordination between the team commander and the regimental intelligence officer located in the combat operations center. When the enemy reported to his forward observer that he was unable to execute the firing mission because an aerial observer was overhead, this information was passed immediately to the regimental intelligence officer. The intelligence officer would, in turn, notify the regimental air officer who would direct the aerial observer. In reality, the enemy was used to direct Marine air to his positions. This system was highly effective and accounted for two 122mm field guns destroyed and two others damaged. For some unexplainable reason, the enemy seems never to have caught on.

~~(S)~~ In addition to the tactical exploitation of specific situations revealed through intercepts, the regimental commander was able to maintain an awareness of enemy capabilities, intentions, command-and-control problems, and disposition and morale. From this more general intelligence, the tactical commander was able to conduct the attack in such a manner as to achieve maximum results while sustaining minimum casualties.

~~(C)~~ The 4th Platoon, First Radio Battalion, at Vandergrift Combat Base provided ^{(b) (3)-P.L. 86-36} to the direct-support team. Without this support, the direct-support team would have suffered costly delays in the timely reporting of information to the supported commander.

(U) The team's story does not end here. After the helicopter had lifted off from the landing zone, enemy ground fire hit one of its hydraulic lines, causing a heavy loss of fluid. The helicopter rapidly lost altitude and the aircraft commander set it down in a remote area about 10 minutes flying time from FSB CUNNINGHAM. Embarked Marines — the

direct-support team and a squad of Marine infantry — off-loaded. With the reduced load, the helicopter departed the area in an attempt to reach Vandergrift Combat Base.

(U) The infantry squad had a radioman who contacted a station and apprised them of the situation. The direct-support team had destroyed the majority of its material prior to lifting off from the landing zone, but some sensitive material and equipment was retained to substantiate after-action reporting and meet certain other postoperation requirements. It was a tense 20-30 minutes before another helicopter arrived and pulled out the Marines. The Vietnamese Dancer was probably the most relieved of all, since his capture would have certainly meant instant death. The team arrived safely at Vandergrift Combat Base and, upon landing, observed that the helicopter which suffered the damage to its hydraulic lines had also made it back safely.

~~(C)~~ Operation DEWEY CANYON reinforced certain Comint direct-support principles which are still valid today. These principles apply regardless of the enemy threat, terrain, and other conditions encountered in a tactical engagement. First and foremost, all the tactical Comint in the world won't do a bit of good if the supported commander and his intelligence staff either don't believe in it or don't know how to use it. This may be considered a fundamental truism, but there were instances in Vietnam when the tactical commander failed to realize the advantages (and, yes, the disadvantages) of Comint support. As has been noted, this was not the case during DEWEY CANYON. Comint information was meshed superbly into the overall combat situation.

~~(C)~~ A second critical area is in linguistic support. Without the native Vietnamese linguist provided under the Dancer Program, Comint direct support would have been marginal, at best. The Marine linguist was good and could easily handle some of the more stereotyped transmissions. When it came to handling the rapid "excited" transmissions and pulling out the shades of meanings and other linguistic nuances, the native linguist was essential. The point is not worth laboring here (linguist requirements/training/capabilities, etc. have been the subject of countless studies); however, total reliance on the U.S. cryptologic linguist will result in a rough row to hoe when it comes to nourishing the Comint direct-support field planted to exploit low-level voice communications associated with most potential enemy forces. Native linguist collection support is so very important.

~~(C)~~ A Comint support capability that was sorely lacking was VHF direction finding. Such a

capability at FSBs CUNNINGHAM, TURNAGE, and ERSKINE would have been pure heaven. Direction-finding operations from these three sites would have provided classic support against targets to both the south and west. It is understood that the Marine Corps has taken action to meet this operational requirement and now has equipment fielded which provides mobile, battery-operated direction-finding support through the VHF range.

~~(C)~~ A final area of consideration in providing Comint direct support to forward deployed field commanders is equipment. The DEWEY CANYON experience reiterates the fact that, in the field, the supporting force must be as mobile as the force supported. There is a place and a need for large, generator-powered, sophisticated collection, analysis, and communications equipments. However, as long as Sigint direct-support resources are assigned to fast-moving elements, these Sigint units must have the capability to deploy and redeploy as rapidly as the tactical commander. The need for small, battery-powered, reliable, rugged, light, and simple Sigint equipment remains a valid requirement in the Marine Corps' Sigint direct-support program.

(U) Accounting for 1,617 enemy killed, Operation DEWEY CANYON also unearthed the largest enemy munitions and arms caches of the war up to that time, and, presumably, the record still holds. A total of 1,461 weapons were captured. Among the 215 crew-served weapons captured or destroyed were 12 Soviet-made 122mm field guns.

(U) Major friendly forces involved in this operation included the 9th Marine Regiment, under the command of then Colonel Robert H. Barrow, who is now serving as the Commandant of the Marine

Corps; his subordinate 1st, 2nd, and 3d Battalions commanded by Lieutenant Colonel G. W. Smith, Lieutenant Colonel G. C. Fox, and Lieutenant Colonel E. R. Laine, respectively; the 2d Battalion, 12th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel J. Scoppa, Jr., who provided direct-support artillery for the operating ground forces; C Company, 3d Engineer Battalion; elements of the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, who provided security forces for FSBs CUNNINGHAM and ERSKINE beginning in mid-February; air support provided by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and 101st Airborne Division; and two battalions from the 2d ARVN Regiment.

(U) It was the officers and men in these units that faced the enemy and made Operation DEWEY CANYON the tremendous success that it was; it was they who suffered intense enemy fire and totally miserable weather to accomplish the mission; it was they who, "as a result of their gallant action," preempted the "North Vietnamese Spring Offensive in the I Corps Tactical Zone." To some extent, a small Comint direct-support team from First Radio Battalion also contributed to their victory and assisted in saving some of their lives.

(U) Major James S. Rayburn enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1957 and was commissioned in 1968. He has served in Vietnam, Spain, Hawaii, Virginia, and the District of Columbia and is now commanding officer, Company K, Marine Support Battalion, Pensacola, Florida. Among his awards, Major Rayburn holds the Navy Commendation Medal (with 1 star and combat V) and the Bronze Star (with combat V).